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RR RUEHDE RUEHDIR RUEHIHL RUEHKUK
DE RUEHBC #0048/01 1480337
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 270337Z MAY 08
FM REO BASRAH
TO RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD 0330
RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0747
INFO RUCNIRA/IRAN COLLECTIVE
RUCNRAO/IRAQ COLLECTIVE
RUEHBC/REO BASRAH 0784

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BASRAH 000048

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 5/26/2018

TAGS: PGOV ECON IR I2

SUBJECT: SHIA INDEPENDENT SHEIKHS REFLECT ON POST-COK BASRAH, SADRISTS, AND NEIGHBORING STATES INFLUENCE ON ELECTIONS

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CLASSIFIED BY: Howell Howard, Director, Regional Embassy Office Basrah, Dept. of State.

REASON: 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C/REL MCFI) Summary: In a meeting held on May 19 at the Regional Embassy Office in Basrah, Sheikh Amir Faiz of the Bani Amr tribe and esteemed Shia cleric, Sayyid Adil al-Musawi, said that the Charge of the Knights (COK) operation was a historic event which brought security to Basrah but cautioned that the slow pace of reconstruction could jeopardize its success. Both indicated that the Sadrists had lost popular support since COK and that they were suffering from a lack of leadership. The two also said that Basrawis have grown disenchanted with the established political blocs, and that independents stood a good chance in the upcoming provincial elections. Though Sheikh Faiz revealed that the Iranian Consul had already offered to support his candidacy, the two warned the U.S. not to focus solely on Iranian efforts to influence the elections, as Iraq's other neighbors will also try to interfere as well. Both said that the U.S. could play an important role in ensuring that the elections remain as free and fair as possible by assisting the GOI in training and increasing the number of election monitors, identifying appropriate election centers, and funding voter education campaigns. End Summary.

COK: SUCCESS OVERSHADOWED BY RECONSTRUCTION DELAYS

¶2. (C/REL MCFI) During a meeting held May 19 at the Regional Embassy Office (REO) in Basrah, Sheikh Faiz and Sayyid Musawi discussed the improved post-COK environment in Basrah. Claiming that it had been a "benchmark operation," Sheikh Musawi stated that it had brought security to Basrah, and the residents of Basrah had developed a new respect for the GOI, the Prime Minister (PM) and the security forces (ISF). He said that COK had freed Basrawis from the endemic lawlessness and violence of the past few years, and that people were extremely happy with this turn of events. With obvious happiness, he shared how the markets were now teeming with people and residents felt safe enough to go out at night and enjoy themselves. Sheik Faiz agreed, stating that the COK operation had historic significance, and that Basrah was now a much better place.

¶3. (C/REL MCFI) Both men cautioned, though, that the slow pace of reconstruction activities threatened to derail the progress gained by COK. Sheikh Musawi recalled that when the PM was in Basrah, he promised that the GOI would take Basrah's reconstruction seriously, and though they do not doubt his sincerity, nothing has come to fruition. They alleged that Safa al-Safi, whom the PM had tapped to oversee reconstruction activities in Basrah, planned to use the \$100 million emergency reconstruction fund to further his own political agenda prior to the upcoming Provincial Council Elections. Sayyid Musawi and Sheikh Faiz claimed that Safi, a native Basrawi, was

in the process of establishing his own independent political party which he hoped to field in the upcoming elections. Warning that any further delays in commencing reconstruction activities could empower the Sadrists and other opponents of the GOI, Sayyid Musawi said that the PM needed to reconsider Safi's role in the process. Sheikh Faiz went further, stating that the PM should recall Safi to Baghdad and establish an independent commission to oversee reconstruction, whose membership could be drawn from the existing Provincial Council and prominent Basrawis.

SADRISTS: DOWN AND OUT, FOR NOW

14. (C/REL MCFI) Discussing the Sadrists role in Basrah's political arena, Sayyid Musawi posited that the movement was suffering from a leadership vacuum. Because of this, it was difficult to gauge their intentions or even the direction that the movement wanted to take. If this continued, Sayyid Musawi opined that Sadr's followers would join other political groups, with the obvious beneficiary being Fadhila. He also warned that the continuing delays in reconstruction could sour the newfound respect that Basrawis have for the GOI, and ultimately could benefit the Sadrists, and by extension, Fadhila. Weighing in, Sheikh Faiz said that in the past, the Sadrists' anti-CF stance garnered them appeal among many Basrawis. Now that Coalition Forces had withdrawn to the Basrah Air Station (Note: some UK and U.S. troops are currently at the Basrah Palace. End note.) and it is clear that the British forces will eventually depart, that appeal has diminished. Additionally, when the Sadrists' central leadership appeared in complete disarray during COK, more people deserted the movement, and Sheikh Faiz said that their popular base was a fraction of what it once was. Most importantly, Sheikh Faiz said that many in Basrah have an unfavorable opinion of the Sadrists; simply put, they have lived under them, and did not want to repeat that. He predicted that the Sadrists would decline to participate in the elections if

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given the opportunity, as their electoral performance in Basrah could prove embarrassing. In his estimation, Fadhila stands to benefit, as he believes many former Sadrists supporters would vote for them.

ELECTIONS: INDEPENDENTS, INTRIGUES, AND U.S. ROLE

15. (C/REL MCFI) Commenting on the upcoming provincial elections, Sheikh Faiz claimed that the people of Basrah had grown extremely frustrated with the inefficacy and corruption of the major political blocs, and that independent candidates have a good chance in the upcoming elections. He also acknowledged that he planned to run as an independent on his own list, the Unity and Justice Assembly. Sayyid Musawi was more circumspect, agreeing that the time was ripe for change, but also expressing fears that given the importance of Basrah, Iraq's neighbors would attempt to influence the outcome of the elections "through money and fatwas." Both cautioned the U.S. against thinking that only the Iranians would be involved, stating that many of Iraq's neighbors would also attempt to dictate the outcome. They also stated that the neighboring states are more likely to support existing political blocs, asserting that Iran had lined up firmly behind ISCI/Badr, and the Sadrists, if they participate, while Kuwait and Saudi Arabia were supporting Fadhila. (Note: Fadhila officials visited Saudi Arabia some weeks ago. End Note.) Illustrating the degree of Iranian interference that has already emerged, Sheikh Faiz recounted that the Iranian Consul had urged him to join one of the more established political blocs, such as ISCI, Badr, or even the Sadrists, and hinted at his willingness to support his candidacy. Sheikh Faiz declined the offer.

16. (C/REL MCFI) Stating that the U.S. could help ensure that these elections are as free and fair as possible, Sayyid Musawi requested that the U.S. assist the GOI in increasing and training the number of election monitors to prevent fraud from occurring at polling stations. He also suggested that the U.S. and others work with election officials to identify appropriate

locations for election centers, so that whenever possible, they are in as neutral a location as possible and not in party bloc strongholds. Most importantly, he would like to see an effective voter education campaign that focuses attention on the importance of the elections, arguing that these elections, more than any other, will shape Iraq's future for years to come.

HOWARD